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# McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld.

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After years of covering the Balkans, British journalist Misha Glenny was not keen on risking his life again. He specialized in reporting on the Balkan independence wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia. This time around, he decided instead to hang out with mafia dons, cyber criminals and ruthless contract killers. The result: McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld.

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Current estimates suggest that illegal trade accounts for a staggering one-fifth of the global GDP or gross domestic product, with \$250-500 billion (around Rs11-22 trillion) worth of fake goods circulating around the world annually. McMafia burrows into this global criminal underground by following that age-old investigative tip: Follow the money. Easier said than done. The global underground is a hydra-headed monster that takes Glenny to dingy cafes in Serbia, gambling dens in Osaka and glitzy offices in Dubai. He finds that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the resultant power vacuum spawned a new generation of entrepreneurs — of the criminal variety. In Bulgaria, weightlifters, wrestlers and boxers who were once state heroes, pumped with steroids to win Olympic medals, found themselves jobless. They muscled their way into illegal trade and protection rackets (the Bulgarian wrestlers, Glenny tells us, had a stranglehold on the stolen cars network).

What is fascinating is that even as the Balkan countries were embroiled in civil war, their criminal underground — and elites — were conspiring behind the scenes to beat the trade embargo by trafficking in drugs, arms, oils, weapons and migrants. In that sense, India was an interesting exception. The Bombay Stock Exchange blasts of 1993 actually showed how the underworld split on communal lines, with Hindu gang lords taking on Muslim dons.

Glenny follows the Dawood Ibrahim story from Mumbai to Dubai, buttressed by interviews with inspectors (“encounter king” Pradeep Sharma, among others) and contract killers. These chapters make for engrossing reading because he takes the time to join the dots — showing how the collapse of the textile mills in the 1980s after a Datta Samant-led strike in the city helped create the social conditions for the real rise of Dawood. At the same time, Dubai, which has modest oil reserves, was becoming the safest place to stash money.

A large part of Dubai’s elite was involved in Dawood’s core business — gold smuggling. But when Indian economic reforms dealt a blow to gold smuggling, Dawood chose a new product: heroin.

To guarantee success in that business, there was one organization he needed to get close to: Pakistan’s ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), which eventually asked Dawood, according to Glenny’s sources, to use his network to smuggle in a “special” cargo meant to avenge the Babri Masjid demolition and killings of Muslims in 1992. Glenny speaks with one of the men involved in the operation who discusses, over spicy prawns in a little restaurant in Bandra, Mumbai, his training in RDX explosives in Pakistan.

Glenny’s real strength as a writer and journalist is the way he can humanize this worldwide web of goons and killers through stories of real people, such as that of contract killer Mahmoud. Mahmoud compares executing a kill to feeling “like Brian Lara when he hits the ball for a six”.

At the same time, Glenny doesn’t let go of the larger picture. He shows how the Bric nations — Brazil, Russia, India and China—have the perfect ingredients to become global powerhouses for crime, especially cyber crime, because of steep levels of poverty, high standards of education and an entrenched culture of criminal activity.

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